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## NEW BOOKS REVIEWED.

BY HENRY JAMES FORMAN, ARTHUR BARTLETT MAURICE AND  
SIMEON E. BALDWIN.

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### LORD ACTON'S "LECTURES ON MODERN HISTORY."\*

THE profound student of history will beyond all doubt find a vast deal of absolutely authoritative and reliable information in these sixteen lectures of Lord Acton collected by careful editors in the present volume. No historian of recent years possessed a more thorough knowledge of facts, no one had a clearer mind for associating and grouping them, and no one a deeper reverence for them. But to that great majority made up of what is called the "lay reader" the book is of greater importance even than to the student of history generally. It is, in fact, a primer of history.

The word "primer" may suggest a sort of elementary text for the young, but that it is emphatically not. He who would venture into these lectures must be resolved for serious work. Their very style has a forbidding air. Indeed, Lord Acton's conviction that history must be approached with gravity and sobriety brings to his work a regrettable kind of cloistral austerity. "His lectures," the editors tell us in the introduction, "were not either in delivery or substance adapted to the assiduous note-taker." Obviously they were not. The reader may recall Stevenson's opinion upon the style of Lord Acton's predecessor at Cambridge, Sir John Seeley, whose manner of writing Stevenson termed "a winking, curled-and-oiled, ultra-cultured, Oxford-don sort of an affectation that infuriates my honest soul." And Seeley's style, be it said, was perhaps ten times simpler and better than the best of

\* "Lectures on Modern History." By the late Rt. Hon. John Edward Emerich, Lord Acton. New York and London: The Macmillan Co.

Lord Acton's. The virtue of the present volume, clearly, lies in the substance, and the gist and heart of it is a kind of pious zeal and fervor for historical knowledge.

Those who follow French literature may remember how a recent life of St. Francis of Assisi, by the perfervid religious enthusiasm in its pages, wrought so potently on certain French minds that even some students of the Latin Quarter, it is said, embraced the cult of St. Francis. For a brief space they walked in his footsteps and added chastity and charity to the virtue of poverty, already theirs. The lectures of Lord Acton will, in similar fashion, though perhaps more abidingly, instil in the reader a great desire for historical study. On his very first page, the author cites that famous dictum of Seeley's that, "Politics are vulgar when they are not liberalized by history, and history fades into mere literature when it loses sight of its relation to practical politics." With him we stand aghast at the darkness of the Middle Ages when men "became content to be deceived, to live in a twilight of fiction, under clouds of false witnesses," and with him we rejoice that "unlike the dreaming historic world ours . . . has devoted its best energy and treasure to the sovereign purpose of detecting error and vindicating entrusted truth." No intellectual exercise, he tells us, "can be more invigorating than to watch the working of the mind of Napoleon, the most entirely known as well as the ablest of historic men." And every part of modern history, he assures us, "is weighty with inestimable lessons that we must learn by experience and at a great price, if we know not how to profit by the example and teaching of those who have gone before us, in a society largely resembling the one we live in."

The sixteen lectures, naturally, do not pretend to cover the whole domain of Modern History. If the work of Lord Acton could without a feeling of irreverence be compared to anything journalistic, it might be said that these lectures are like the captions of a newspaper. Run your eye over them and you gain an idea, though not a very complete one, of the day's news. In the same manner a perusal of these chapters will give the reader a kind of bulletin of the history that was made between the dates of the Renaissance and the American Revolution. The lectures are crowded with facts. Take, for instance, the one on "The New World." Beginning with the explorations of Henry

the Navigator, the lecture touches, however briefly, upon every important point of exploration and discovery down to the voyages of Cortez. Even more complex and comprehensive is the subject of the "Renaissance." It was the age of the revival of Greek learning and humanism, and also the age of endless bloodshed and cruelty. Every one penned sentimental poems after Petrarch, while, at the same time, Machiavelli wrote his famous treatise. Savonarola thundered against vice and vanity, while Pope Alexander VI and his children practised every crime to such an extent that even to-day the name of Borgia is synonymous with monster. And yet, for all its complexity, Lord Acton treats of the subject in one lecture in such a way that no important group of facts is left untouched. And the net result of reading this portion is an awakened desire in the student to penetrate further into that brightly colored, vivid period. Some of the other topics dealt with in similar fashion are "Luther," "The Thirty Years' War," "The English Revolution," "Lewis XIV," "Peter the Great" and "The American Revolution." Every sentence carries with it the conviction of truth, and every page creates an impulse to delve deeper into the subject-matter. And before long we become at one with the author in his idea that the study of history "fulfils its purpose even if it only makes us wiser, without producing books, and gives us the gift of historical thinking, which is better than historical learning."

HENRY JAMES FORMAN.

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#### A NEW HUMORIST.

IF contemporary fiction is to be judged and classified according to the standards which have prevailed for the past eight or ten years, Mr. Nesbit must be credited with having, in "The Gentleman Ragman,"\* tapped what is practically a new vein of humor, for to find the plausible suggestion for its spirit and atmosphere one must turn back to the rollicking, whimsical and yet always half-serious pages of "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn." This is a bold comparison, and one which, even with the necessary modification, constitutes bold praise. Yet it is an inevitable

\* "The Gentleman Ragman." By Wilbur Nesbit. New York: Harper & Brothers.